

News story: Armed Forces Minister attends EU meeting

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Minister of State for the Armed Forces Mike Penning has attended an EU informal meeting in Malta, alongside Defence Ministers from across the EU.

Ministers from the 28 EU countries discussed the EU's operational engagement in the Mediterranean and Libya, including Operation Sophia, the mission to tackle the Mediterranean migration crisis.

The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), European Defence Action Plan (EDAP) and European Defence Fund were also due to be discussed at the meeting.

Press release: Formal Northern Ireland Talks to resume after General Election

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At roundtable discussions today involving the UK Government, the parties capable of forming an Executive and the Irish Government, it was agreed that formal talks to establish an Executive will be paused until after the General Election. Talks will resume following the Election, enabling the formation of an Executive before the 29 June deadline.

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Rt. Hon. James Brokenshire MP, said:

Over the past seven weeks all the main parties have been engaged in discussions and some progress has been made, including on the development of a Programme for Government and on legacy. There are, however, a number of outstanding issues.

All the parties involved recognise it is vital devolved government, and all of the institutions established under the Belfast Agreement

and its successors, resumes in Northern Ireland as soon as possible.

Although formal roundtable talks are paused until after the General Election, a range of bilateral discussions will continue, with a view to building on progress.

Speech: High Commissioner's speech at the Queen's Birthday Party

The last 12 months have been an extraordinary period in modern British political history. On 24th June the British people woke up to the momentous news that they had voted to leave the European Union after over 40 years of membership. Despite predictions to the contrary, the UK economy has continued to perform strongly – indeed unemployment levels have fallen further below 5% and growth levels keep surpassing expectations. Meanwhile a new prime minister was rapidly appointed and an orderly transition ensued. The British political system, many centuries old, is tough and resilient.

The next historic date came on 29th March this year when the UK invoked Article 50 to begin the formal process of leaving the EU. Then came the surprise announcement of the general election to be held on 8th June. Political pundits are enjoying a field day. We must await the election result to see what is likely to happen next. But I will make two comments.

Firstly that Britain is, has always been, a global nation, forging a web of connections around the globe. Empire and mass immigration have cemented this. London is one of the world's most diverse and vibrant cities, with almost every language and ethnic group represented, including a large Zambian community. While Europe will always be immensely important for the UK, we are keen to enhance other links, such as with the Commonwealth, taking advantage of the next Commonwealth Summit to be held next year at Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle. I am delighted that a fellow Commonwealth mission, Canada, has recently co-located with us in the British High Commission's Lusaka office.

Secondly, trade between UK and Zambia suits both our interests. Trade and investment underpins our economies and creates jobs. An example of this mutual benefit is provided by Zambia Sugar, mostly owned by British Associated Foods through Ilovo Sugar, which exports a quarter of its total production to the EU, of which half comes to the UK. This is good for Zambia and good for the UK. Access for this sugar to the EU is duty and quota free – and it would be in Zambia's interest for this preferential access into the UK

market to continue.

Turning now to Zambia, the last 12 months have been eventful here too. During the August elections, I visited polling stations in Eastern Province as an EU election observer. ECZ coped well with formidable logistics: I inspected one remote polling station near Petauke that had no roof and was enclosed by a reed fence, but was nevertheless staffed by all the right people and equipped with all the right equipment. Unfortunately the elections proved a turbulent period for Zambia. It will be important for Zambia to do better next time, drawing on the EU election mission's expert recommendations.

The UK quickly accepted the election results and recognised the new government. We have encountered a welcome readiness by the President and by his Ministers to engage with international partners to further the country's development. There is much to be done together, including in the agricultural sector, where the UK works in close partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture, and through CDC have invested £60 million in that highly successful Zambian company, Zambeef.

Sadly, one legacy of the elections is an entrenched political divide that has spawned the recent upsurge in tension. I have three observations to make following consultations with the Foreign Office in London.

First, respect for the head of state is a cardinal rule in international relations and democracies. The incidents in Western Province appear provocative. It should be possible to combine polite respect, and adherence to Zambian protocol, with disagreement and even legal challenge. I repeat that the UK, along with the rest of the international community, have recognised the Zambian government. Her Majesty the Queen rapidly congratulated HE Edgar Chagwa Lungu as the President of the Republic of Zambia, and we look forward to working in partnership with Zambia until the next elections.

Second, beware the hard-liners, who will use any excuse to promote heavy-handed tactics and creeping authoritarianism. The manner of what happened on the night of Monday 10th April represents a blot on Zambia's record that has been picked up by the international media and noticed in foreign capitals. The UK hopes this blot does not spread into a larger stain.

The UK firmly counsels that the best response to political divisiveness is more dialogue, not less; more openness, more freedom of expression, more media freedom, more tolerance, not less. Law and order is important, yes, of course, but must be underpinned by dialogue and compromise on all sides. We know this from decades of experience in Northern Ireland. I am being badgered by the BBC, by international investors, who are worried; Zambia has long been a beacon of peace and harmony, Zambians should not take this for granted.

Third, this political impasse is a huge distraction from what should really matter: the economy, of course. The UK commends the Government for embarking on a much-needed, Zambia Plus economic reform programme to address serious problems. We, together with other international friends of Zambia, are already assisting Zambia to implement reforms. The UK, as a development

super-power, and with our position on the IMF Board, is well placed to help.

The challenge for Zambia is to reprioritise and mobilise revenue, and manage increasing debt, so that spending stimulates economic growth and protects the poorest, rather than disappearing into subsidies that benefit better-off Zambians and even British High Commissioners, instead of the 60% who still live in poverty.

During my first year in Zambia as British High Commissioner, I have particularly enjoyed travelling to far-flung corners of this lovely and friendly country. I have handled raw emeralds at the Kagem mine near Kitwe; sat with villagers near Pemba discussing goats purchased through cash transfer programmes; and even danced with the Minister of Higher Education at a Lusaka ball. I have discussed State House's mischievous velvet monkeys with HE the President – along with rather more important matters of state. I have had tea at my Residence with the imitable Fred M'membe wearing his trademark communist party cap. Like many of us, I have gazed in wonder at natural spectacles along the Zambezi, Kafue, and Luangwa rivers, and hoped for effective action to prevent poachers robbing future Zambian generations of these rich national assets.

[News story: CMA announces new Northern Ireland representative](#)

Robert Stewart has been appointed as the CMA's new representative in Northern Ireland and will take up his position from 1 May.

Robert was previously a sector regulation manager in the Competition and Markets Authority's (CMA) Belfast office and had particular responsibility for managing the concurrent competition arrangements with the NI Utility Regulator as well as undertaking the role of project manager on the recent market study of Legal Services in England and Wales.

Robert commenced his career in the private sector where he worked in banking for almost 14 years, predominantly in commercial finance as a client manager. Since 2012, Robert has worked in the public sector, specialising in competitive markets and the regulation of utilities. Robert is also a voluntary Trustee of the Board of Ulster University Students Union, non-executive director of Active Belfast Ltd and formerly non-executive director of Niamh (now called Inspire Wellbeing).

News story: Kitesurfer rescued from Bideford Bay

Great birds eye footage of the rescue of a kitesurfer from Bideford Bay.

On Monday night (24 April) we received a 999 call from a member of the public reporting a kite surfer in difficulty in Bideford Bay.

The UK Coastguard search and rescue helicopter took this great birds eye footage of the rescue after Croyde and Bideford Coastguard Rescue Teams and the RNLI Appledore Lifeboat Station were sent to the scene.

Luckily the casualty was spotted by a Coastguard and was recovered safe and well by the all-weather lifeboat. Ian Guy, Maritime Operations Controller said: 'This was extremely good outcome and an excellent example of some great teamwork between our crews. The casualty was located in our search area quickly and thankfully, although cold he was ok. We recommend when kite surfing that you always ensure that you wear the right gear – including a buoyancy aid and a helmet, check the weather forecasts, tell someone your passage plan and practice rescue signals with your instructor in case the worst should happen.'

[Footage of the Bideford Bay rescue](#)